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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000479

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM PINR KPAL MASS SY IS LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 SECRETARIAT SEEKS U.S. SUPPORT
FOR ELECTION STRATEGY

REF: BEIRUT 470

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 Secretary General Fares Suaid outlined current thinking for March 14's next steps in the wake of the Arab League summit. Unified support for a cabinet reshuffle continued to be hampered by individual political aspirations and Christian concerns. However, March 14 needed to be prepared to go on the offensive after the next wave of political violence. Suaid therefore was preparing a proactive strategy based on three principles that would redefine the dialogue with the opposition in terms that would make it difficult to object, with the ultimate goal of proceeding with a simple majority election of a president. He admitted, however, that he had not yet discussed the idea with March 14 leaders. Suaid believed the opposition was in disarray, and viewed Michel Sleiman's announcement of early retirement as a warning to the opposition to stop blocking his election. End summary.

ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT:
POLITICAL VICTORY FOR MARCH 14

¶2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor met with March 14 Secretary General Fares Suaid and Secretariat member and March 14 MP Samir Franjieh on April 4 at Suaid's request to hear the Secretariat's latest plans. Suaid deemed the March 29-30 Arab League Summit in Damascus a political victory for March 14. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others demonstrated strong Arab support for the Siniora cabinet by sending low-level representatives. In addition, Lebanon was able to show that the political crisis was directly linked to the Syrian-Lebanese conflict, as opposed to Syrian and March 8 efforts to paint the problem as internal disputes over issues like the electoral law and cabinet formation, he added.

MARCH 14 STILL DIVIDED

OVER CABINET EXPANSION

¶13. (C) Now it was time for March 14 to take political action, Suaid continued. One option was to expand the Siniiora government to include some big Maronite names such as Samir Geagea, Carlos Edde, Amine Gemayel, and Dory Chamoun. Merely filling the vacant seat of assassinated Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel with his father Amine Gemayel is basically impossible, Suaid argued, because Geagea, a rival of Amine Gemayel's, would oppose this unless he also secured a seat in the cabinet. Suaid also suggested that Minister of Finance Jihad Azour, seen as a skilled but apolitical technocrat, should be replaced by a minister with a prominent image as a Maronite political leader.

¶14. (C) Suaid disclosed that at a lunch hosted by PM Siniiora just 24 hours after the Patriarch had voiced his opposition to cabinet expansion, he sensed Siniiora would rather support an expansion than elect a president with a simple majority. However, March 14 Christians as well as the Patriarch oppose expansion because it would give the impression the country could be ruled without a Maronite president. Suaid thought this objection could be overcome by portraying cabinet expansion to the Patriarch as an effort to counter Syrian interference in Lebanon, rather than a move to reinforce the government.

¶15. (C) Walid Jumblatt, on the other hand, was in favor of expansion, while Saad Hariri's position was unclear. There is a "superficial animosity" between Saad and Siniiora, Suaid explained, with Saad calling for new, younger blood, to replace what he criticized as aging cabinet ministers.
(Comment: Likely in Saad's mind, this younger blood would include himself as the next prime minister. End comment.)

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CONTEMPLATING SIMPLE MAJORITY
ELECTION IF VIOLENCE STRIKES AGAIN

¶16. (C) Meanwhile, March 14 needed to be prepared to react to the next political assassination or security incident by calling now to elect a president with a simple majority, Suaid and Franjieh both argued. (Comment: Surprisingly, Suaid claimed that the Patriarch was "not far" from the idea of a simple majority vote. End comment.) To do so, however, it needed to apply a new initiative as soon as a security incident happened.

¶17. (C) Suaid disclosed that he was elaborating a new strategy, not yet agreed by March 14 leaders, whereby March 14, rather than Speaker Berri, would set the agenda for dialogue with the opposition. All previous initiatives had failed because of Syrian opposition, Franjieh noted, so this new strategy was an attempt to "get back to Lebanese basics."

This dialogue would be based on three principles of Lebanese legitimacy: 1) the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, especially regarding Lebanon's support for an armistice agreement with Israel; 2) Arab legitimacy as outlined in the 2002 Arab Peace initiative, emphasizing Lebanon's solidarity with the Arab world and not Iran; and 3) UN Security Council resolutions, including the full application of UNSCRs 1559, 1701, and others.

¶18. (C) The idea, Suaid explained, was not to compromise with Hizballah but to build a new political dynamic and present to the public a new proposal for dealing with Hizballah. Because this proposal would be based on already accepted principles of legitimacy, it would be next to impossible for the opposition to say no. March 14 would tell people that Hizballah, by catering to Syrian efforts to block UNSCRs 1701 and 1559, had made the country pay enough and it was time for a change. March 14 would then call for a deadline for the presidential election to let the people decide.

¶9. (C) Suaid said he would like to hear U.S. reaction to this new strategy prior to presenting it to March 14 coalition leaders. He hoped to finalize a paper outlining the strategy by the following week, which he promised to share with the Embassy.

OPPOSITION IN DISARRAY

¶10. (C) Suaid scoffed at the opposition's noises about forming a general secretariat and political paper mimicking that of March 14's. Pointing to opposition figure Suleiman Franjieh's April 3 interview on the popular Marcel Ghanem talk show, in which the Marada leader said he would agree to an election if there was agreement to accept the 1960 electoral law for the 2009 parliamentary elections, Suaid said it was clear the opposition was not unified. Furthermore, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement was currently tied up in an internal battle for leadership positions (now postponed until October), Hizballah was waiting for Syria's report on the April 12 assassination of Imad Mougnieh before deciding its next course of action, and the Shia in the south were panicked about talk of a new conflict with Israel.

¶11. (C) Our March 14 interlocutors thought that the Syrians would wait for the outcome of the April 6 meeting between the Kuwaitis and Saudis before revealing the Mougnieh report. However, they suspected the report would accuse Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the U.S. and March 14 itself. They said the Special Tribunal was "omnipresent" in Franjieh's interview, and it was clear that Franjieh, a pro-Syrian who was Minister of the Interior at the time of former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination, was sending a desperate message to Damascus that he was "still with them."

SLEIMAN ANNOUNCEMENT
SEE AS WARNING TO OPPOSITION

¶12. (C) Suaid viewed Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman's recent announcement that he would retire on

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August 21 as a warning to March 8, especially as he delivered the message via pro-Syrian as-Safir newspaper. In Suaid's opinion, Sleiman was signaling to opposition figures like Talal Arslan, Michel Samaha, and Suleiman Franjieh that he knew they were working with the Syrians to block his election. The message also was intended, Suaid said, as a warning to March 8 Christians that if the opposition did not stop blocking the election, Christians would lose two of their posts: the presidency and the LAF commander.

¶13. (C) Suaid opined that Sleiman still had a chance to become president. Furthermore, he believed that once Sleiman returned to life as a civilian, he would drop his objection to being elected by a simple majority, as he would no longer fear the impact on the army.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Our first reaction to Suaid's new strategy is: What took you so long? As outlined to us, the strategy seems to have the inherent advantage of cornering the opposition by making it impossible for them to object to the three principles.

¶15. (C) The only thing that concerns us at this stage is that Suaid and Franjieh have not yet discussed the idea with March 14 leaders. We have repeatedly and consistently urged March 14 to show a united front -- and warned that they will play into the opposition's hand if they fail. While the internal coalition bickering over cabinet formation and electoral law has, in recent months, disappeared from public viewing, we

still hear complaints from all sides about lack of consultation. Geagea's people tell us they are tired of Hariri's people pushing them around and taking them for granted, while Hariri's people tell us, essentially, that Geagea is trying to punch above his weight. Meanwhile, one of March 14's erstwhile choices for the presidency, Boutros Harb, has made no secret of his displeasure at not being consulted by March 14, and has noticeably distanced himself from the majority. No doubt Suaid, like Speaker Berri in his effort to secure U.S. support for a new National Dialogue, is hoping the weight of U.S. approval will help bring others on board.

¶16. (C) Nevertheless, we view this as a positive development.
Whereas other initiatives will live or die in terms of whose personal ambitions are satisfied, this one has the merit of being based on principles, not personalities. End Comment.
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